Media hysteria over attacks in Australia

Even in routine coverage of news stories about their nationals residing overseas, news media can easily abandon any pretence of being objective. The media in both countries need to stay calm and use their capacity to investigate and report on the issue in a balanced and objective manner, says USHA M RODRIGUES.

Mail Today’s Ku Klux Klan cartoon.

In this era of globalisation and a globalised media environment, news is still local — be it in the form of being local about a local place, or about a local person living overseas. And this sense of localism seems to dwarf the basic rule of journalism — objectivity. When teaching journalism, I often tell my students that there are two circumstances when news is not objective (and even not expected to be covered objectively by its audiences). The first is war, or an on-going conflict with another country, and the second is a sporting contest between two countries. But what I seemed to have missed is that even in routine coverage of news stories about own nationals residing overseas, news media can easily abandon any pretence of being objective.

In recent media coverage of the stabbing of an Indian student, Nitin Garg, in the inner Melbourne suburb of West Footscray in Australia, a number of Indian news journalists and commentators have alleged that this murder, similar to 2000 odd assaults on Indian students in the past two years, has been racially motivated. Similarly, but not surprisingly, there is a counter reaction in the Australian media ranging from denial of racism playing a part in these attacks to pointing out that India too has its own type of racism that is based on caste system in society and gender bias where brides are burnt for in-laws’ greed.

You will not often receive an absolute assertion from an Indian living in Australia that they think Australia is a racist country. At the most, one could argue that there is a minority in Australia which discriminates against others on the basis of their race and skin colour. Yes, there is discrimination in India, Australia and elsewhere in the world, which can be based on caste, gender, class, religion or just a person’s looks. But does that justify killing an indefensible person whether in India or Australia — It is inhuman and should be unacceptable to all that a person is killed for no other reason than because he is from another race or country.

Perhaps, that is why Australian authorities are not ready to identify these cases of assaults and murder of Nitin Garg as ~racist~, and reiterate that it is a matter of on-going investigation. To that extent, nobody can say for sure, based on facts publicly available, that Nitin Garg’s murder was racially motivated.

The Victorian Police Chief Commissioner, Simon Overland, has in the
recent past defended his use of the term ~soft targets~ for Indian students, particularly if they carry laptops, mobile phones an MP3 players, calling the issue of ~crime against the person~ being ~symptomatic~ of what is happening in the community as a whole. Overland admitted that some of the crimes were ~racially~ motivated, but he believed that many of the robberies and assaults were simply ~opportunistic~ because a lot of international students work and study late at night and travel home by trains.

The reality is that whether it is a short-term visitor ~ student from India ~ or a long time resident Australian, all should be objecting to the increasingly deteriorating law and order situation in Melbourne or Sydney. Here are some statistics to keep in mind, in Victoria (which includes the city of Melbourne) 36,765 people were victims in ~crime against the person~ such as robberies and assaults in 2007-2008. As against that, 1,447 people of Indian origin were victims of such crimes, an increase from 1,082 the previous year, according to Victoria state police. In 2008, Indian students~ population in Melbourne doubled to 46,000.

The Indian government~s ~common sense~ advisory recognises that these are random acts of violence fuelled by alcohol and drugs, and cautions Indian students accordingly: "Do not travel alone late at night. If you are travelling alone, make sure that you have checked out your route carefully and that you keep to well-lit, populated areas as far as possible, make sure that someone knows where you are going and at what time you are expected to return."

Meanwhile, the media (in both countries) need to stay calm and use their capacity to investigate and report on the issue in a balanced and objective manner ~ presenting views from both, if not various sides ~ and seek out solutions for this undesirable situation. A cartoon depicting Victoria Police akin to Ku Klux Klan published in Delhi~s Mail Today, could be said to be an exercise in ~freedom of the press~, but it offends people who are not responsible for the violent act, and distracts the police from doing its job. Similarly, Australian commentators comparing how many people are murdered in India compared to Australia, seem to aggravate the situation by evading the issue of why these assaults on vulnerable people in society be tolerated.

If Indian media coverage of the attacks on Indian students (in Australia) is accused of reaching hysterical proportion, it is well covered in Australian media too, more so since the Indian students~ protest in Melbourne and Sydney six months ago. However, over the past few months what has changed is the readers~ response to these stories. As media increasingly incorporates citizen~s voice via blogs and readers~ comments on issues and opinion pieces, the level of alarm is increasing, further adding to the sense of ~us~ and ~them~ phenomenon and the racism chant.

Perhaps, something good will come out of this cacophony of noise and that is Indian students coming to Australia would have modified their mind-set about safety in a foreign country, and take precaution of finding as much about life in Australia, particularly the cost of living and safe travelling, as possible. This is where media in both countries can play a
constructive role in informing visiting students and long term residents of Australia about each other's needs and culture. The call for "go home" if you don't like it here makes no sense because this exchange of education service is mutually beneficial for both Indians and Australians. Australia earns about AU$2billion in export income from this sector because of Indian students. By the same token, Indian students personally benefit from the education or better their chances of becoming Australian citizens or take back the skills they have learnt in Australia to benefit its economy.

Dr Usha M Rodrigues in a senior lecturer in journalism at the University of Southern Queensland.

1

Print

Window Close